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RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 000191

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [KZ](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: DETAINED NEWSPAPER EDITOR YESERGEPOV  
ALLEGEDLY LINKED TO SHADY BUSINESSMAN

REF: A. ASTANA 0058

[1](#)B. 08 ASTANA 2383

Classified By: Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland, 1.4 (b)/(d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Media reports link Ramazan Yesergepov, the Editor-in-Chief of "Alma-Ata Info" newspaper who has been detained and charged with disseminating classified information, with an unsavory business tycoon, Sultan Makhmadov. One of Makhmadov's companies is under investigation for tax evasion by the Committee for National Security (KNB). Makhmadov's case is the subject of the November 21 Alma-Ata Info article that cited two classified KNB documents and landed Yesergepov in his current predicament. The KNB alleges that Makhmadov "organized the theft" of the classified documents and paid Yesergepov to publish the article. Yesergepov, who is refusing to divulge his source, denies any links to Makhmadov. The MFA cited these details in arguing to us that the Yesergepov case is not a human rights case. Yesergepov's wife asked for our intervention in getting the court to release him on bail and reduce the charges against him. We provided her with NGO contacts to help her obtain a new defense attorney. END SUMMARY.

SHADY BUSINESSMAN ...

[1](#)2. (SBU) More details are coming to the fore in the case of Ramazan Yesergepov, the Editor-in-Chief of "Alma-Ata Info" newspaper who remains in the custody of the Committee for National Security (KNB), charged with dissemination of classified information (ref A). Various media reports point to ties between Yesergepov and an allegedly unsavory businessman named Sultan Makhmadov. Makhmadov is a business tycoon in Zhambul oblast who began with a small shop in the early 1990s and successfully built a conglomerate that produces over 30 types of goods, including food additives, bio-ethanol, and liquor. Last year, the Zhambyl oblast KNB apparently opened a tax evasion investigation into one of Makhmadov's liquor-export companies, "Taraz." The KNB contends that the company failed to pay over \$6 million in taxes and customs fees on its liquor exports. The authorities have also hinted that Makhmadov, who is an ethnic Chechen, has links to warlords in Chechnya and has been involved in illegal arms smuggling, although no charges have

been brought against him on these grounds.

... OR VICTIM OF KNB PERSECUTION?

13. (SBU) The "Alma-Ata Info" article that landed Yesergepov in his current predicament deals specifically with the KNB's investigation of Makhmadov. The article, published on November 21, accused the Zhambyl oblast KNB of attempting to use its influence to steer the legal process. As evidence, the paper published two letters allegedly from the head of the Zhambyl oblast KNB to national-level KNB Chairman Amangeldy Shabdarbayev, both marked "classified." In the first, the Zhambyl KNB head claims he wants to inform "interested parties" that Makhmadov will try to reach out to President Nazarbayev in order to "blackmail" the authorities investigating him. (NOTE: Makhmadov has been known to boast that he is "a friend of the President," although it is hard to judge the strength of those ties. He has also been linked to Rakhat Aliyev, Nazarbayev's exiled former son-in-law. END NOTE.) In the second letter, the Zhambul KNB head asks Shabdarbayev to reach out to the Prosecutor General and the Supreme Court to assure a favorable verdict in the KNB's court case against the "Taraz" company. The "Alma-Ata Info" article also alleged that the KNB fabricated evidence against Makhmadov and exerted pressure on a witness to give false testimony.

JOURNALISM FOR HIRE?

14. (SBU) The provenance of the two classified letters is the crux of the authorities' case against Yesergepov. Yesergepov refuses to disclose his source, but the KNB

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alleges that Makhmadov "organized the theft" of the documents and paid Yesergepov to publish the article. According to press reports, the KNB claims that proof of remuneration and evidence that Makhmadov "edited" the article were found during the KNB's search of Yesergepov's offices. Makhmadov was arrested in early December and charged with illegal receipt and dissemination of state secrets, although he has since been released on bail. Yesergepov denies any links to Makhmadov. In a letter to the diplomatic corps about the case, Yesergepov's wife accuses the authorities of intentionally linking her husband to "these people" to scare him and force him into a confession.

MFA MAINTAINS CASE IS REALLY ABOUT MAKHMADOV

15. (C) MFA Americas Department head Talgat Kaliyev told us on January 27 that Yesergepov's case is not a human rights case at all and the Embassy "should stay away from it." He maintained that Yesergepov is not an important civil society figure, but rather "a nobody," publishing a newspaper with very limited circulation, and now he is enjoying his 15 minutes of fame. Kaliyev claimed that the case is really about Makhmadov -- whom he described as a "manufacturer of counterfeit vodka" -- but Yesergepov got caught up in it because Makhmadov paid him to publish the internal KNB documents to discredit the criminal investigation against Makhmadov. Unfortunately, Yesergepov became frightened and refused to voluntarily submit to KNB questioning, and that only got him in more trouble. Kaliyev said that he had warned colleagues in other ministries that despite all these facts, the case would draw negative attention from the international community, and cause problems for Kazakhstan -- which is exactly what is happening.

WIFE ASKS FOR INTERVENTION

16. (SBU) We also met on January 27 with Yesergepov's wife, Raushan Yesergepova, who came to Astana to meet with the Prosecutor General's Office and foreign diplomatic missions, including the Czech Embassy in its capacity representing the EU Presidency. Yesergepova said she had briefly visited her husband in detention several days earlier, and reported that

he is being treated well. She requested our assistance in getting the court to release him on bail and reduce the charges against him. She also expressed dissatisfaction with her husband's defense attorney and disappointment that no big-name human rights defenders have stepped up to aid her husband. We explained that we are following her husband's case closely, but can not intervene directly with the court. We informed her aVl\_{4XWh NGOs involved in providing legal aid for journalists. (NOTE: Our understanding is that one of these NGOs is now assisting her in obtaining a new defense attorney. END NOTE.)

17. (C) COMMENT: The latest revelations support our earlier conclusions that the Yesergepov case is far from a straightforward one. Our approach needs to continue taking into account the nuances of the case, which is exactly what we managed to do in our January 22 OSCE PC statement. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND